

Preliminary EES Information Sheet for Existing Conditions

Agriculture and Forestry

Introduction

The purpose of this document is to provide a summary of the existing conditions identified for agriculture and forestry within the Western Renewables Link area of interest (AOI). Identifying the existing agriculture and forestry within the AOI is an important step towards understanding the potential impacts, interactions and considerations for the project.

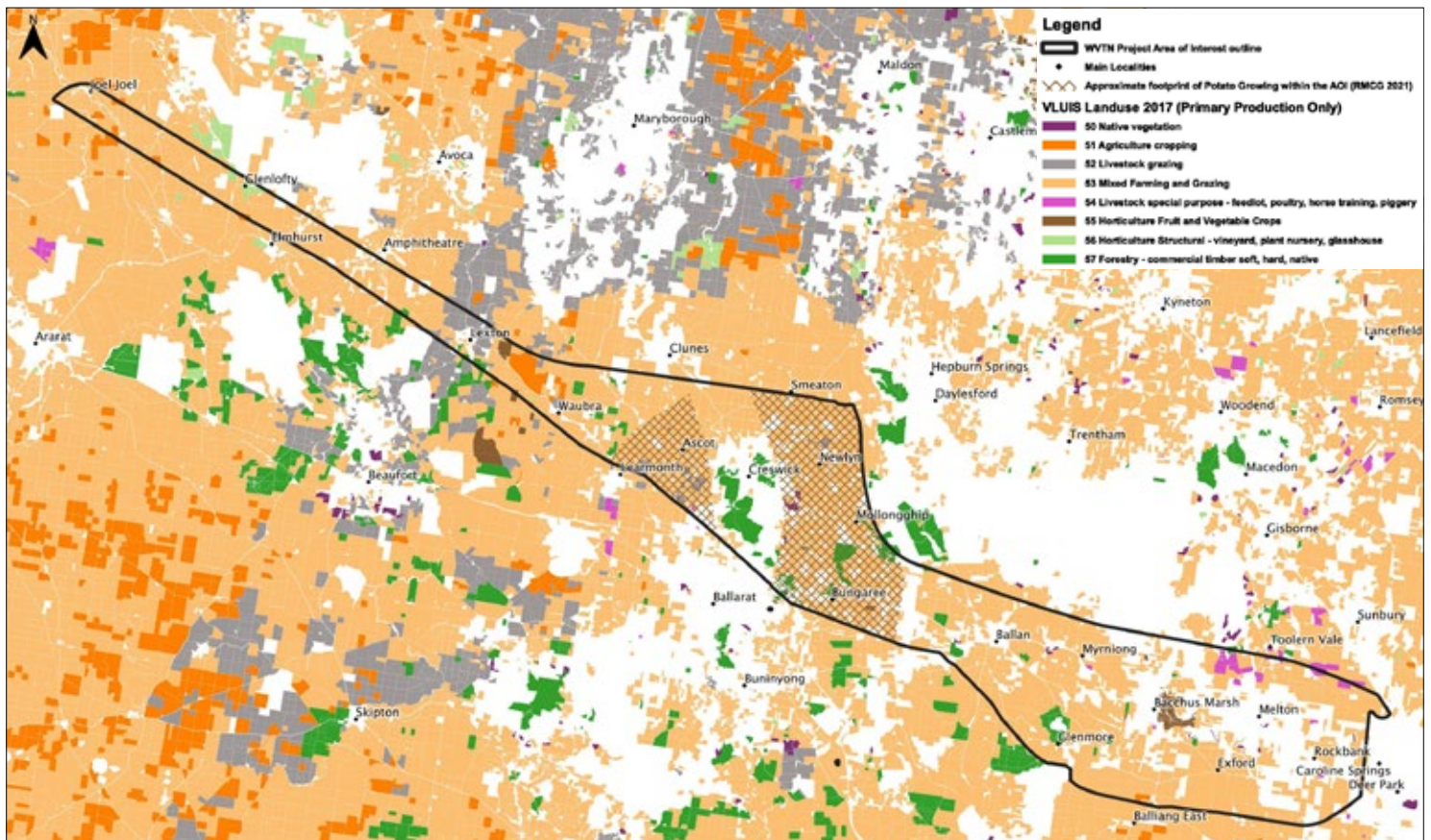


The existing conditions have been identified by qualified, independent technical specialists and include land use activities, soil and water assets. Site visits, research, and mapping was undertaken and relevant legislation, policy, guidelines, and planning scheme land zonings impacting agriculture and forestry were considered. Field surveys and investigations will be undertaken within the project corridor to gather more information, where required, about existing conditions and potential project impacts. The findings will be updated and included in the agriculture and forestry impact assessment for the Environment Effects Statement (EES).

Community and stakeholder feedback

The community has provided important input about the existing conditions including:

- Agricultural production, farming practices, use of large machinery and equipment, and irrigation equipment.
- Bushfire risk associated with forested areas in close proximity to the project corridor.



Primary production land uses classified by VLUIS (Data source: LANDUSE_2017, DELWP, 2021)

Land use

Agriculture is the dominant private land use within the AOI, and farms often support mixed businesses. The strategic significance of the productive agricultural land in the AOI and the importance of protecting and supporting agricultural land uses, especially in peri-urban Melbourne, has been widely recognised by government and industry groups. Agriculture and forestry activities in the AOI include:

- Wool, sheep meat, beef, intensive animal husbandry, potatoes, horticulture, crops, wine grapes, niche agriculture, and hobby farms.
- Agroforestry, shelter belts, wind breaks and native revegetation areas.

Property size

The largest properties are in the western section of the AOI, and the southern part of the eastern section. In the area around Ballarat, property sizes are smaller, indicative of the more intensive potato growing and rural residential land uses.

Soil

The central portion of the AOI offers very high-quality soil and more reliable rainfall, resulting in higher value crops and more productive farming. The soils around Ballarat are some of the most productive in Victoria and sustain potatoes and intensive crops with very high value production per hectare. The soils in the Bacchus Marsh Irrigation District are also of very high quality, sustaining intensive vegetable and fruit production of very high value. Varied forms of predominantly dryland agriculture occur across the remainder of the AOI.

Water

Around Bungaree and Mollongghip there is a groundwater management area used for irrigation by potato growers. Near Newlyn and Hepburn Lagoon there is the Bullarook regulated surface water supply system. There is a gazetted irrigation district at Bacchus Marsh, where irrigation water captured by Southern Rural Water in the mid-Werribee River catchment is delivered to licensed irrigators in the Bacchus Marsh Irrigation District. The Western Irrigation Network is under construction in the eastern end of the AOI. This recycled water scheme will bring irrigation water to the Balliang and Toolern Vale areas, as well as to the Parwan Employment Precinct south of Bacchus Marsh. For less intensive grazing and cropping enterprises outside the managed water areas, farmers rely on groundwater and surface water systems for stock and domestic water.

Potatoes

The land around Ballarat supports a high value potato industry. Significant investment has been made by farmers and commercial processors to develop the potato industry over many years. Occurring on the most productive soils and where the most reliable surface and groundwater irrigation supplies are available, potatoes represent the highest intensity broadscale use within the AOI, along with vegetable and fruit production at Bacchus Marsh. Potato growing is a mechanised horticultural operation, with large machinery used for sowing, cultivating, harvesting the crop, along with transport, storage and irrigation infrastructure.

Three types of potatoes are grown:

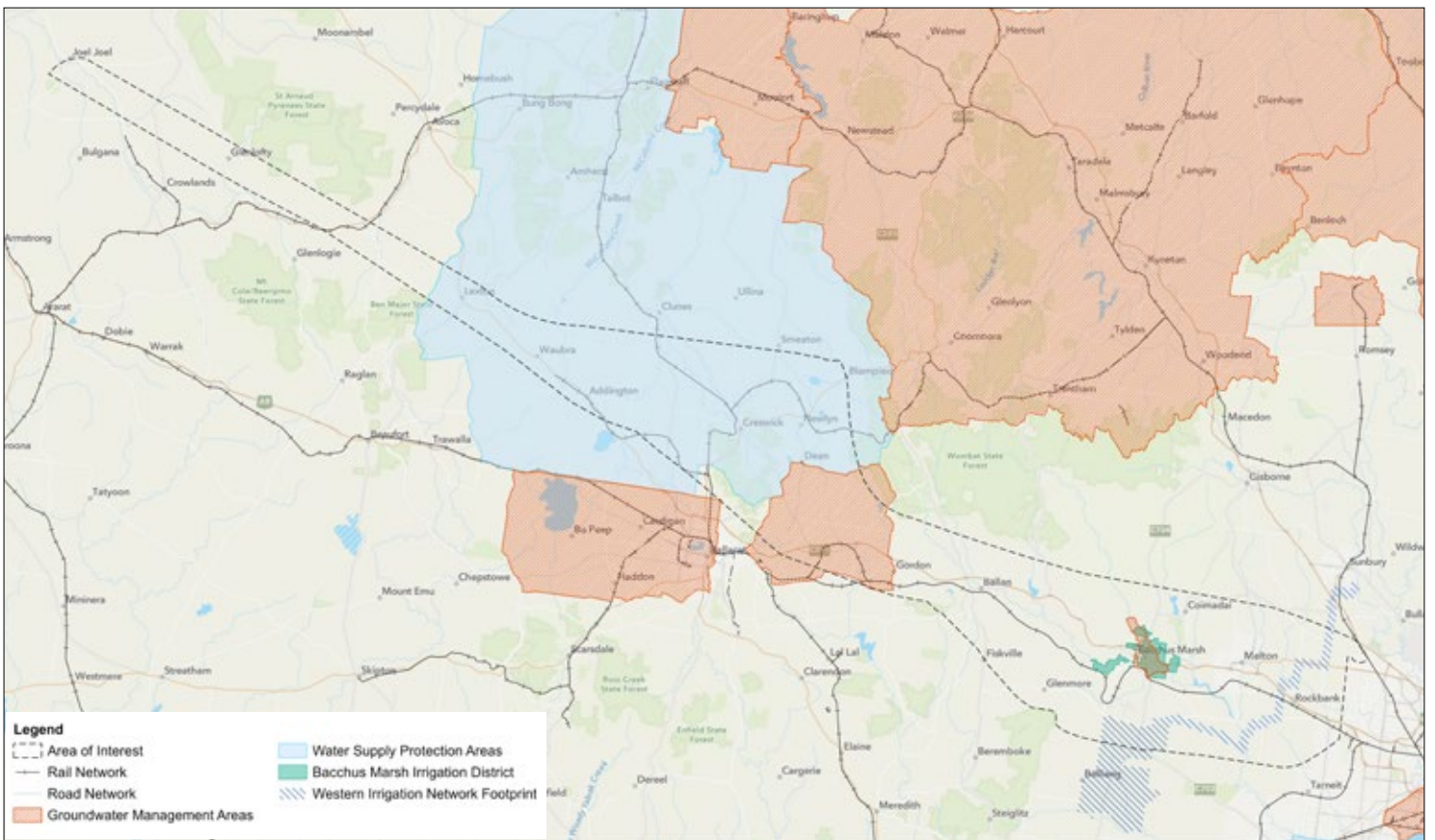
- Seed potatoes – grown under certification and strict biosecurity.
- Processing potatoes – grown to order and specification to supply the two main processing companies McCains and Simplot.
- Fresh potatoes (ware) – grown for supply to domestic vegetable markets.

Wool, lamb and beef

Wool, lamb and beef production occurs across the AOI. In the centre of the AOI from Ballarat to the Wimmera, production levels are highest compared to other parts of the AOI and are comparable to the highest levels in Victoria. In terms of infrastructure, broadacre grazing areas have improvements such as fences, dams and water systems, and pastures. Structures such as hay sheds, stock yards, silos and machinery sheds are located at strategic locations.

Horticulture

Vegetables, including fresh salad greens, garlic, orchards, tree nuts and other herbs are grown in the eastern section of the AOI and within the potato growing areas. The Bacchus Marsh Irrigation District is a highly concentrated and intensive production area. High value enterprises often use complex systems including irrigation, crop rotations, weed management systems, high levels of employment, onsite value add and production quotas. Other horticultural enterprises are generally isolated and in small plots.



Water Distribution (Data sources: WSPA, DELWP, 2021; GMA, DELWP, 2021; IRRIGATION_SYSTEM_ALLOCATION, DELWP, 2021)

Crops

Cropping of cereals (oats, wheat, barley), pulses (lupins, beans), oilseeds (canola) and fodder crops (such as lucerne and brassicas) takes place across most of the AOI. The Melbourne peri-urban fringe in the eastern section of the AOI, particularly in the south near Balliang, the high production areas near Ballarat and the extreme western end of the AOI near Landsborough, support extensive areas of broadacre cropping. Modern farming systems and use of technology is common in agricultural enterprises across the AOI, including precision farming techniques utilising GPS and large-scale equipment.

Niche agriculture

Small-scale niche agriculture operations are scattered across the AOI. Examples include apiculture for honey and pollination services, vineyards, plant nurseries, flowers, turf, seed production, truffles, organic goat dairy, small studs, cottage gardens, aquaculture, rice growing, emus and ostriches.

Hobby farms

Hobby farms or lifestyle properties are more prevalent in the eastern section of the AOI, closer to Melbourne and around Ballarat.

Forestry

There are several large, connected areas of Radiata Pine plantations near Creswick (to the west, south and east), around Wilsons Reservoir (near Bullarook), south of Spargo Creek, and between Gordon and Ballan. There are also scattered pine plantations between Lexton and Creswick.

Blue Gum plantations are found near Gordon, near Moorabool Reservoir at Bolwarrah, and between Waubra and Mount Beckworth, with the largest grouping of plantations around Lexton. There are a limited number of plantations west of Mount Lonarch.



Wool and lamb production



Crops

Considerations for the project

A range of considerations have been identified for further investigation and management which will be addressed in the agriculture and forestry impact assessment including:

- Reduced area for agricultural production due to the acquirement of easements.
- Restrictions on farming activities and practices within the easement.
- Biosecurity impacts, including spread of weeds and pathogens due to construction and maintenance activities.
- Impact on vehicle and equipment clearances, including use of irrigation equipment and farm machinery, on farming practices.
- Construction impacts including biosecurity, soil, fences, dust and noise, on livestock and farming practices.
- Water supply and catchment management impacts of construction and easements.
- Impact of infrastructure on Bacchus Marsh Irrigation District.
- Specific impacts on related industries such as downstream processors, suppliers and contractors.
- Limitation on aerial spraying in easements.
- Safe clearances and density of trees under powerlines.
- Safe clearances for tree fall zones.
- Reduction of area of land for forestry production.
- Need for vegetation clearing and maintenance for safety.
- Impact on forest access, log stockpiling and management areas, fire safety and aerial operations.

Next steps

- More detailed observations of agriculture and forestry activities within the project corridor.
- View and interpret detailed aerial imagery and other relevant spatial information to assess the extent and the variation of agriculture and forestry land use patterns.
- Meet with landholders, industry and agency representatives for each key agricultural and forestry enterprise to understand specific issues and requirements.
- Prepare an agriculture and forestry impact assessment based on the project corridor, including proposed mitigation measures to manage any potential impacts. The impact assessment will inform the proposed route and be published as part of the EES. The EES will be an important source of information about potential project impacts for the community, landholders, decision-makers and as part of the approvals process.



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